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WALT WHITMAN. By Bliss Perry. Second edition revised. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

WALT WHITMAN. By George Rice Carpenter. New York: The Macmillan Co.

At Walt Whitman's death, says Professor Perry, some of his friends "thought, perhaps remembering the poet's own serene conviction of immortality, that he really was not dead at all, and that in some new guise he would come again." Mr. H. B. Binns' *Life of Walt Whitman*, originally issued in the year previous to Professor Perry's first edition, closes on precisely that note. "It is incredible", says Mr. Binns, "that any being who has consciously entered upon the life of love which approves itself to the soul as God's own life, can be fundamentally affected by death." In a certain sense these idolizing friends were right; as a force in literature and life Whitman is the only American poet vigorously alive today. He does come again in new guises; he reveals himself under unexpected aspects to old friends; he steadily seeks out fresh acquaintances. It must therefore be many years before the critic can perceive the final direction and character of his influence, or define his place in literary history. The witnesses who have spoken hitherto are, taken altogether, incomparably contradictory; and yet—it is the best evidence of the poet's *stirring* power—they are all intensely in earnest. In the already vast mass of writing about Whitman in several languages, one is constantly bewildered by the plangent personal note; one must either give ear to the fervent panegyric of an apostle who makes his master equal with Plato and Christ or to the no less fervent denunciation of an enemy who thinks he is attacking an arrogant barbarian or a dangerous degenerate. Thus—to speak only of the apostles—John Addington Symonds found in Whitman a kind of personal savior; John Burroughs, so late as 1896, had to confess that he wrote with a certain "one-sided enthusiasm"; and Mr. Binns in his biography of 1905 could not suppress the glow of uncritical adoration.

The peculiar merit of Professor Perry's book is that it approximates that criticism of the centre, of which we have all heard so much and seen so little. It is refreshingly free from the sacred unction and religious solemnity assumed by the disciples. It does not proselyte nor denounce nor attempt to say the last word on the subject. It aims to set forth what to an open-minded critic, centrally located in the republic of letters, regardless of the past as well as the future of literature, Whitman means today. Since we insist on knowing the lives as well as the works of the poets, Professor Perry thinks we may as well have the unadulterated facts. In spite of his researches, the history of Whitman's mental development prior to the pub-

lication of the *Leaves of Grass* remains exceedingly fragmentary. After everything ascertainable has been told of his external career, the appearance of these poems continues to be an almost unheralded apocalyptic event. Perhaps it is too late ever to recover that missing chapter. Professor Perry has done much, however, to recover the visible and material man from the colored mists that were fast gathering around him. The saint's legend of the Good Gray Poet, fathered by O'Connor, he has completely dissipated. It will be of distinct value to the final court of posterity to know that the Great Companion as his followers call him, was tempted in all points and *not* without sin. The evidence of an egotism occasionally quite unpoetic, the unpaid debts, the six illegitimate children should furnish a wholesome corrective to the silly personal sanctification of Whitman. These imperfections in the character of the bard are recorded unsparingly and, indeed, with a certain humorous gusto, yet quite without angry animus or moralization. It was to be expected that protests would be made against certain passages in the book; but the letters of remonstrance printed in the appendix of this edition did not lead Professor Perry to make much alteration in his text, nor do they substantially affect our conviction that he has given us a generally veracious portrait of his subject.

Toward Whitman's poetry and gospel Professor Perry's attitude is friendly but not devout—that is to say, it is discriminating and above all sensible. One may even feel that for the subtlest interpretation of a mystical writer it is perhaps a shade too sensible; for it cannot be denied that there were genuine values and visions in Whitman's experience which are quite beyond the reach of the most sovereign common sense. Into the fascinating problem of the "inward illumination" Professor Perry does not penetrate farther than to suggest a possible relationship between the passionate indulgences of the poet's early manhood and his "divine phrensy". From his comment on most points it is obvious that he thinks Whitman will survive by the vote of men of sense and not by the consent of mystics. For example, he is not in the least shocked by the seer's breaches of conventional decorum; but he considers them unwise because rather ridiculous. He feels the uplift of Whitman's exultant faith in democracy; but he finds the "divine average" an empty piece of rhetoric, and the golden nimbus about the head of the average man scarcely discernible. He is sure that portions of the poetry have the manner and matter of great verse; but, on the other hand, he declares that there are large masses of crude ore wholly unfused in the fire of genius; and when he puts an ode of Keats's beside the *Leaves of Grass*, he is troubled with profound questions about the new theory of

art. At the same time he discards with emphasis the old notion that Whitman was a slovenly artist. With his contributions to the biographical record, these two points are perhaps the most valuable part of Professor Perry's work; his discussion of the origins and analogues of Whitman's peculiar style, and his indication of the sources and relationship of his ideas. More adequately than any other biographer he has pointed out Whitman's indebtedness to his contemporaries and predecessors and his position in the general intellectual movement of the century.

In one respect Professor Carpenter's biography is distinctly retrogressive; it harks back to the really exploded notion that Whitman owed little to literary culture—that he left his carpenter's bench and sang democracy much as Caedmon left his sheep and sang creation. Says Professor Carpenter: "He was little influenced by books. When his mind was simmering, as he once said, Emerson helped to bring it to a boil; but he was never a man of books." A scholarly poet in the sense in which Milton and Gray were scholarly poets of course Whitman was not; but that his mind was steeped in literature it now seems idle to deny. He not only acknowledged that Emerson brought his mind to a boil; he definitely and publicly saluted him as master and as the intellectual pioneer and prophet of America. He not only gave his American poems French titles and a curious sprinkling of French words; he actually contemplated a poem on Rousseau, as Professor Perry tells us, and both his thought and emotions were deeply tinctured by early and intimate acquaintance with Jean Jacques. Almost equally conclusive is the evidence of a large Oriental influence in his writings. No one, perhaps, has laid sufficient stress on the fact that Whitman was first and last and always something of a journalist by profession and thoroughly a journalist by temperament. This means that he was frequently satisfied with second and third hand sources of information; but it also means that every pore was open to influences streaming in from the daily press and periodical publications, and that in the course of his life he came in contact with an enormous mass of such literature. Professor Perry quotes in a footnote Emerson's smiling remark that *Leaves of Grass* was a combination of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *New York Herald*. This jest might well be elevated into the text; for it seems to hit the nail on the head.

Professor Carpenter's book will not supersede Professor Perry's as a complete biography of the man; but some readers may find it a rather more suggestive and sympathetic study of the poet. It takes a much less debonair attitude toward Whitman's violations of drawing-room etiquette; it attempts to set in a favorable light certain incidents which provoke Professor Perry's mirth or condemnation; and it is considerably shorter

by the omission or condensation of the letters and comments of contemporaries. Partly as a result of this abridgment, the different stages of Whitman's intellectual and poetical development are made decidedly more distinct. And the steady rising of the poet to higher levels, less feverish airs, and broader fields of vision is a fact too much neglected both by his ardent admirers and by those who pass him by on the other side. Furthermore, Professor Carpenter finds the mystical element in Whitman's experience eminently worthy of attention. He is unwilling to ignore it even if he cannot wholly understand it,—that is to say, he is not quite so certain as Professor Perry that men of common sense can grasp all we know on earth or all we need to know. Speaking of Whitman's "multitudinous inventories and catalogues" he says, "It begins to grow clearer that this element is of the very essence of his art; that it was perhaps actually the origin of his art. It was, I surmise, through the psychological process of which the inventory is the sign that he reached the peculiar state of consciousness by virtue of which he is a poet; and the inventory is the test of the reader's ability to follow him in this process". This suggestion is not so witty as Professor Perry's comparison of the poetical inventory to the coupling of Pullman cars, but it is more illuminating. In the main Professor Carpenter is the more subtly interpretive, Professor Perry the more vigorously critical of the two biographers. Both agree that Whitman was a great poet, yet both write soberly and may be read without bewilderment.

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